

# Fortnightly Sermon

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## HE THAT WAS TO COME.

"I that speak unto thee am he."—JOHN iv., 26.

I have noticed that in reading some poem or some scene in a story, or in being in some place or presence, we become impressed with the greatness and value of goodness. We say, "Goodness is the best, the most worthy thing; it is great and beautiful." This is always *a sudden experience*. We are reading or listening for amusement perhaps, or for information in some manner, not at all for moral enthusiasm or instruction. Suddenly the page or place is illuminated; almost we stamp our foot on the ground, like Galileo, exclaiming aloud, "It is true! It is not a mistake! Character is the great and perfect value! Holiness, Truth, Beauty, are the worthy things!" In his "Way toward the Blessed Life," Fichte says, "The enjoyment of a single hour passed happily in the pursuit of art or science, far outweighs a whole life-time of sensual enjoyment; and before the picture of this blessedness, the merely sensuous man, could it be brought home to him, would sink in envy and dismay." But so far as any are only creatures of sensation and seekers after pleasures, it is continually brought home to them that there is a better way of life, a transcendent nobility which shines when at all it is seen and at once is known to be the one real undying joy. And especially in so far as we know better than we do, we read or see or hear something which gives us suddenly such a rapturous sense how worthy, great, beautiful and strong faithfulness is, and how real religion is, and how pure and lovely is devotion, that we exclaim, "It is good for us to be here; we will build tabernacles and stay here forever." You will find that some eloquence, poem, music, in which one person can see only ordinary expression, common imagination, no large beauty, will lift another to the seventh heaven. This is because something

in his experience vibrates to those strings, and the piece suddenly lets in heaven on his sight, his love, his resolution. Sometimes this sudden sense of the greatness and beauty of holiness is roused by places or persons. The holy quiet and tender associations of a church may awake it, or such a heavenly countenance as sometimes one beholds in aged persons, or the innocence of a little child. We meet such a vision of goodness and behold the beauty suddenly, as if in turning a corner on some common errand, we beheld a grand and noble statue in a niche, not there when we passed the spot a half-hour before.

Here, in illustration, are some fugitive lines which I have met in many different places, named "Tired Mothers":

A little elbow leans upon your knee—  
Your tired knee that has so much to bear—  
A child's dear eyes are looking lovingly  
From underneath a thatch of tangled hair.  
Perhaps you do not heed the velvet touch  
Of warm moist fingers holding yours so tight,  
You do not prize the blessing overmuch—  
You are almost too tired to pray to-night.

But it is blessedness! A year ago  
I did not see it as I do to-day—  
We are so dull and thankless, and too slow  
To catch the sunshine till it slips away.  
And now it seems surpassing strange to me  
That while I wore the badge of motherhood  
I did not kiss more oft and tenderly  
The little child that brought me only good.

And if, some night, when you sit down to rest,  
You miss the elbow on your tired knee—  
This restless curly head from off your breast,  
This lisping tongue that chatters constantly;  
If from your own the dimpled hands had slipped,  
And ne'er would nestle in your palm again,  
If the white feet into the grave had tripped—  
I could not blame you for your heart-ache then.

I wonder that some mothers ever fret  
At little children clinging to their gown;  
Or that the footprints, when the days are wet,  
Are ever black enough to make them frown.  
If I could find a little muddy boot,  
Or cap, or jacket, on my chamber floor—  
If I could kiss a rosy, restless foot  
And hear it patter in my house once more;

If I could mend a broken cart to-day,  
To-morrow make a kite to reach the sky,  
There is no woman in God's world could say  
She was more blissfully content than I!  
But ah! the dainty pillow next my own  
Is never rumpled by a shining head;  
My singing birdling from its nest has flown—  
The little boy I used to kiss is—dead!

A man I am acquainted with carried these lines in his wallet, and never he could read them without running to take all his children in his arms with such an unwonted solemnity of fondness that the little ones looked wonderingly while they returned the caresses. I know one, too, who never can read a particular passage in "David Copperfield" without instantly going in search of his wife to confer a look or word that may add to her happiness.

The principle herein is that God sets on us such responsibility that each one must say to his neighbor the words of Jesus at the well of Sychar. Like the Samaritan we go with a pitcher to draw water or after some other business, and beside the well or the work-bench or in the business house, we find a wonderful stranger. Perhaps we have seen the person before; no matter. Perhaps a thousand times before; it is the same. At that moment he is the stranger from heaven. He tells us all that ever we did; he throws a sudden light over the future; he arouses in us a sense how majestic, strong and beautiful sincere goodness is. Happy for us if we understand that this is the language by which he says to us directly, "I that speak unto thee am he." He is the prophetic He. We behold a miracle of the Divine Providence. The book, the picture, the voice, the person, at that instant have authority from God. To you, that person is "He that was to come," your Messiah, your Saviour, your Confessor. Daily I see more clearly that we are placed here with a mission ordained for us. 'Tis not needful that we know it, further than to keep clean, do well and defend the divine counsels in the conscience from admixture with a vagrant will. In that we are commissioned. When we meet the person to whom we are sent, they feel such motion within, such arising of joy, faith and purpose on that instant, as is a declaration from heaven as plainly as if we said, "I that speak unto thee am he." You that speak to me are he—I that speak to you am he—if so be that there be anything in us at the moment which is God's providing of grace for us by one another.

I had some little business with a friend, in ending which I said, "That now is finished for the present, and I am obliged to you for your goodness." He answered, "Perhaps I am obliged to you for my goodness." The words startled me. I could not

shake them off. I perceived we are all obliged to each other for our goodness. Each to each is "He that was to come" in those moments of unconscious testimony when we are God's providence to some one and fill some soul with celestial messages. For what could be more authoritative, more divine, than the impression at that instant made on my spirit?

Often in the mimic life of the drama this inspiring quality is displayed powerfully; many a player, great or humble, has been "He that was to come," a providential man to some among the spectators, he being for the instant transparent to beauty and goodness which shine through him as through a glass.

I once attended a play, taking a friend with me, the play including a dance or ballet in one scene. While the lithe dancers were weaving their mazy patterns, as if a gorgeous tapestry of which their bright costumes were the threads and their lissom bodies the shuttles, my duller sense beheld it only as one sight, singling out no particular element thereof; but my companion had nicer perception; she said to me, "There is one face among those dancing girls I want you to look at, it is so sweet and child-like, as innocent as a babe's." I looked and saw. I perceived also how solicitous the young thing was about the dance, how very watchful as to her part and the procession of the intricate figures. It was plain that she saw neither people, nor lights nor scenes, nor had any gleam of the purple and gold in which she marched—knowing only the dance in which she had her part to maintain unless the whole should be overthrown. Somehow, from that moment, I ceased to follow the weaving pattern. I beheld only that one living shuttle of the tapestry. It was as if nature as an artist had suddenly descended crying, "This is 'prentice work; I discern one figure fit to stand, but thus and thus I efface the remaining"—with two or three broad sweeps of the brush obliterating the scene by a neutral background on which the one form was left shining.

Have you not noticed in theatres how a humane sentiment, or even a common moral platitude, spoken in a sincere manner and with circumstance, will win applause?

Nor shall I forget, as long as I can remember aught beautiful, one little simple act which I witnessed in that mimic life, which has a residence in me, like a beautiful picture or a strain

of clear music. It was done by E. L. Davenport, a high master in his art, who long ago took his flight by death to the unseen kingdom, out of which, I do believe, shone through him the beauty that made him to me at that instant "Him that was to come." He was playing Brutus in Shakespeare's glorious drama of Julius Cæsar. He had arrived before the plains of Philippi, on which the armies were to fight the next day. It was night. The arrangements were made, the plans laid, the last words said between the officers; Cassius, Titinius and Messala departed, leaving Brutus alone with his young page, Lucius, whom he asked to play for him a little on his lute, but added:

*Bru.* I trouble thee too much, but thou art willing.

*Luc.* It is my duty, sir

*Bru.* I should not urge thy duty past thy might, I know young bloods look for a time of rest.

*Luc.* I have slept, my lord, already.

*Bru.* It is well done, and thou shalt sleep again; I will not hold thee long; If I do live, I will be good to thee.

Then the boy touched his instrument and began a song; but tired Nature was too much for the young muscles. The song became slow, wandered from time and tune, and ceased at last after one or two mutterings, as the wind goes down. The boy slept. Brutus, listening, said, "This is a sleepy tune," then turning and seeing the boy asleep, exclaimed:

"O murderous slumber  
Lay'st thou thy leaden mace upon my boy  
That plays thee music? Gentle knave, good night;  
I will not do thee so much wrong to wake thee.  
If thou dost nod, thou break'st thy instrument.  
I'll take it from thee "

Here the gentle hero rose, softly approached the sleeping boy and with tender care unlocked his hands from the lute. Then, for a moment he stood still, contemplating silently the child sinking deeper and deeper into slumber; at last, with a slow tenderness of manner, he unclasped from his neck the cloak which he had just put on, and carefully folded it about the boy to cover him from the night air. This done he added gently:

"Good boy, good night.  
Let me see, let me see,—is not the leaf turned down  
Where I left reading? Here it is, I think."

It was when Brutus covered the boy with his cloak that the human nature of all persons so was touched that the simple act

drew forth applause, because it was beautiful. I added then a new chapter to my scriptures which never I can read without that act and picture rising before me, and my soul is stirred.

Sometimes how unexpectedly this heavenly light beams, breaking from some other place as humble as the manger. At one time having a very beautiful alto-relief cast in plaster from the work of a sculptor of great merit, I wished to have it painted so as to preserve the surface from injury, but painted so delicately as not to obscure any of the delicate lines and touches of the artist's chisel wherein dwelt the exquisite expressiveness of the work. I selected for the task an old man who was a sign-painter. I knew nothing of his skill with the brush, but I had seen him and he had impressed me as conscientious. Believing myself unknown to him, I carried him the cast and stated my wish. He looked long and reverently at the beautiful work of art, finally saying that in common he would refuse such a task, but if I were pleased to trust him he would try. At the appointed time I visited his little shop, to find my valued object painted to my utmost satisfaction. Praising the work and thanking him, I asked the price, saying that I would be glad to pay well and add my thanks thereto. He said that he would value the thanks, but, if I pleased, he would take no pay. Much surprised, I said, "Dear Sir, you took this task, as I readily could see, with some reluctance, and you have performed it in a masterly way. I know well the time and pains that go to such a work; you must permit me to reward you accordingly." "No," he said, "I want no pay; the work itself was pay; it was a labor of love." "True," I answered. "So is all good work. Nevertheless, you must not give away your skill and time, for no one should wish to receive them for nothing." "But," he answered, "you made your return beforehand." Seeing my great surprise, he reminded me of his coming once to an office in which I was employed. "Yes," I said, "it was the sight of you then that led me to you for this painting; but I supposed not you would know me." "Perhaps you can recall," he said, that the chief officer had turned me off roughly or at least indifferently, and pushed my business aside. Finding I could get no attention, I was going out mortified and hurt, when you came to me and said a few words that put things straight in my mind if not in my affairs. Now, you must take

this painting as an old man's gratitude." Much moved and with a sense of the presence I stood in, as if suddenly I knew it to be of God, I accepted the gift. The sculptor, when he afterward beheld it, exclaimed with pleasure, saying that no one of his works ever had been so exquisitely and conscientiously finished with the brush.

I can not forget that workman, nor cease to think of my experience in his presence with reverence. I often turn unto him in mind. I wonder where he is. I wonder what his life had been. No doubt he had sorrows; I feel them. No doubt joys; I am glad of them. He was old; I wonder if he has now opened a new sense to beatific certainties of which I dimly dream or hope. Be all that as it may, I know that in that man in that little poor shop I met one who was to come to me. I stood face to face with the providence of God giving me a celestial sight through that servant of his who thought only to offer an old man's gratitude.

'Tis not even necessary to see the one who is to come to you. From very far away, or from long past time, he will raise a tumult in your soul by which he says, "I that speak unto thee am he." I met a record of a life which stirred me mightily when intelligence from the Sandwich Islands brought the news of the death of Ragsdale, the governor of the mournful settlement on the Island of Moloka. He was an orator of great influence in the kingdom, bred to the law, speaking English and Hawaiian with equal ease. One night, sitting in his office studying an absorbing law case, the chimney fell suddenly from his lamp; he picked it up quickly to replace it, forgetting that it was heated intensely. He remembered the heat immediately, but oh! he felt it not. The hot glass was the same to his touch as a cool and pleasant object. He looked at his hands; there was no sign of a burn. Many times he repeated the experiment with the same result. How he faced that fatal sign in the stillness, the darkness, the solitude, that terrible message written veritably on his body by a hand of flame, as on a wall, suddenly,—I have not read—I know not that there was a human eye or ear there present to perceive. He sat repeating the experiment which doomed him, the favored, the prosperous, the powerful, to a loathsome banishment from the face of healthy human beings. He knew that he had the

leprosy or elephantiasis, the terrible and incurable disease of the skin which prevails in tropical places. By this fearful malady, the skin is thickened and loses its sensitiveness. Medical authority soon confirmed the apprehensions of the afflicted man, and at once he informed the civil officers of his condition. But no one wished to move in his arrest according to law. Finding that his eminence and character was respected to that great degree, he delivered himself up to the authorities and was sent to the Island of Moloka where victims of the disease are secluded. He was made governor of this sad community of eight hundred persons and held the office when he died. He took up his fate with so much goodness and so sweet a spirit, so devoted himself to the mournful people whose wretchedness he shared, ruled so wisely, made so many reforms and diffused so much relief about him, that the sufferers loved and revered him as a father. I have read a like story more lately of the life of a Roman priest on the same sad island.

How little we know of life? When some form of it at once so strange and so noble sweeps by us on wings, to be "He that was to come to us," how we wonder and gaze with awe!

If this be the way of Providence, so great a wonder of the moral government of God, that each one thus is made "Him that was to come" and endowed with a saving mission unto others, which silently and unconsciously he is fulfilling to the blessing and salvation of the persons appointed to meet him, surely in this do we find laid on us a very grave and high responsibility—the "blessing of responsibility," as a noble soul used to say. The ancient fable of the fall of Lucifer has certainly this much of truth, that naught can be possible unless its opposite be so. The creature made for light, on that account may elect the darkness. A gigantic mountain, whereon a man being perched he may see the world, if it crumble or come down in land-slides or in spring torrents when the trees that sheltered the soil have been cut off, delivers terrible ruin upon the plain below, spreading a desert of inhospitable rocks where were fertile gardens, so the Son of God, who is lifted up to such a height of providential import and is sent as "He that is to come" to many who await the coming, from that height may cast himself with a terrible fall into gulfs "as deep as heaven is high." He may be so unfaith-

ful, so errant, so unmindful of that Messianic birth which he had and of the mission of glory which he has, that he may be only a useless loiterer by the way, or even a teacher of evil things, a minion of evil. It behooves us to look to our characters. For it is by this, by what we are and do show ourselves to be continually to that infallible sense of human beings by which they know the holy and the true, and detect counterfeit or base alloy, by this it is, that we are ordained sons of God to all other sons of him, especially to the wild and wayward; by this that we must fulfil the appointed mission and meet our fellow being to be known by him as "He that is to come to him." If we be simply good and true, upright, just, kindly, gentle, modest, chaste, unselfish, devoted, humane, sincere,—this is that "virtue" that will "go out of us" when but the hem of our garment sweep some one or be seized a moment by some one to whom we are "He that was to come," by the divine witness of a cure wrought or health imparted, while we are thinking of other things or persons in the throng, or beyond it of other ties and duties. I think I see it so clearly that I dare to say I am sure of this, that God does elect, appoint and send each one of us as truly as ever any saint or prophet of old, whether in Palestine or any other place, to be his sons and to bear witness of him, to speak, heal and bless. And if we bear the witness, then we are not left alone. By ways that no knowledge can explain and no experience exhaust, God testifies unto us; as Jesus said to the cavers, who bad him rebuke his friends because they were singing with triumph and crying out in their joy, "I tell you that if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out."

But this much certainly always we may do,—while knowing that it is by what we are in our hearts that we become the ordained servants and messengers of God who opens passages for our influence when we know it not—this much we may attend to, viz: to be at pains to offend not any one, by bad example or covert sneer at good things, or bold irreverence, or worst of all, by ill talk and vile suggestion in which many appear to find their only humor and knowledge. It is a vile thing to make oneself a sink or sewer of infectious filth; but it is abominable and devilish when much has collected and rotted together, to spread it over the earth. If a man will dig in himself a cess-pool for corrupted

things, let him observe the rules whereby we order the escape-pipes of dwellings. For no one builds a receptacle for disgusting matters, forthwith to turn them out again, but to keep them hidden and harmless. So let whoever inclines to heap up such matters within him and defile the purity of his mind, at least keep them pent up in that pit which he has made of himself, that their black vapors darken not the sky and infect not the common air of life. Consider, fellow man, that if your companion of the moment relish your loose talk, your gross story, your wanton allusion, you poison a creature already sick; but if he relish it not, 'tis a sad and painful wrong to humiliate a clean spirit. You take a mean advantage. For what can one do whom thus you dishonor? It is hard to turn and walk away unanswering. So to do seems rude; it expresses a censure of you which he may shrink from. 'Tis a mean advantage, and dishonorable,—as if you seized some weaker person and tied him up brutally before shocking sights.

But turn from this picture. There are two pictures hanging on opposite walls. I have looked for a few moments at the one behind me. It is a picture of night, having no sun in it, nor moon or stars even, nor any light but the red eye of a thief's lantern. Turn again to the other. It is a picture of light and sunshine, it has a broad highway in it, shaded with arching trees in which birds sing, and higher up, with great white clouds like silver fleece, rolling in the brilliant blue. Along the highway many people walk and children play, culling the flowers. The people seem to be in earnest talk, cheerful but full of intention. What is noticeable is the look of eager questioning in all the eyes and in the parted lips—plainly in all the same question, "Where is he that was to come?" And to that question God ordains every man in that company to answer to his neighbor, "I that speak unto thee am he."